

**CENTER FOR CIVIL JUSTICE**

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*Fighting poverty through advocacy, education, and empowerment.***Testimony to the House Committee on Family and Children Services****HB 6578 & 6587****November 29, 2006**

Chairman Stahl and members of the committee, my name is Jackie Doig and I am a senior staff attorney with the Center for Civil Justice (CCJ), a non-profit law firm representing low income clients in a 14-county region of mid-Michigan and the Thumb, including the urban areas of Saginaw, Flint, and Bay City, as well as surrounding rural areas such as Isabella and Clare counties.

In addition to our direct legal representation of low income individuals and families, CCJ meets regularly and works closely with private, non-profit human services providers throughout our service area, including faith-based organizations and the myriad of other agencies that work to assist parents who are trying hard to maximize their potential for self-sufficiency, and that also attempt to fill the gaps when low income families lack the resources to make ends meet. We also have been active in the Coalition for Independence Through Education (CFITE), a statewide coalition of educators, student parents, and advocates seeking to improve access to higher education for low income parents.

**Summary**

**We are very pleased to see the interest in education and training opportunities for parents receiving Family Independence program cash assistance. Education and training is the key to assisting families in moving from welfare to long term self-sufficiency.**

**However, as currently written, both HB 6578 and HB 6587 would prevent the state from assigning welfare recipients to education and training that is allowed under federal law and would be countable in determining whether the state has met its 50% work participation rate under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant. We urge you to not restrict the state departments and the local Michigan Works Agencies (MWAs) efforts to meet the 50% work participation rate, because failure to meet that rate could have serious financial implications for the state of Michigan.**

In addition, both HB 6578 and HB87 would require parents with low basic skills or without a high school diploma or GED to engage in education or training without mandating that the required class and study time would count toward the parents hourly work/Work First

requirement. Single parents with young children cannot be expected to fulfill their parenting responsibilities while attending school and studying if those hours are required **in addition to** an "up to 40 hours" of work or Work first activities. Furthermore, the statute must provide for voluntary screening for cognitive, learning, and mental disabilities to ensure that parents are placed in appropriate education programs. And additionally, research has shown that adults often learn best when academics are combined with, and relevant to, vocational skills training. Therefore, parents should whenever possible be given an opportunity to attend programs that teach basic or secondary academic skills in the context of vocational training.

**Finally, we strongly oppose the provisions in HB 6578 that would eliminate Work First exemptions for parents who are caring for a spouse or child with disabilities unless the spouse or child needs 24-hour assistance.** The current language of the Social Welfare Act, subsection section 57f(i)(f), already ensures that parents who care for a spouse or child with disabilities are exempt only "to the extent that [they] are severely restricted in [their] ability to participate in employment or training activities." In addition, the statute currently exempts a parent with a spouse who is disabled only if the parent is the "full time caregiver" for their spouse.

### **Maintain Current Exemptions for Parents Caring for a Child or Spouse with Disabilities**

The need for "24-hour a day care" is not necessarily determinative of a parent's ability to regularly engage in work or Work First activities. We therefore recommend that the current, individualized approach to exemptions be maintained.

Parents of children with disabilities may need to be exempted from Work First on a short term or periodic basis because their child's medical care appointments are so time consuming (often involving long distance travel) that they cannot attend work or Work First activities on a regular basis. Others may need to be exempt during after school hours and summers because child care for a child with severe disabilities is cost prohibitive. Still others may have a child with mental disabilities whose behavioral symptoms result in frequent calls to remove the child from school, thus making it impossible to regularly attend work or Work First, even during normal school hours.

**Expand Education and Training Opportunities, Rather Than Limiting State Flexibility to Meet Federal Work Participation Rates**

Under federal law, hours that parents spend in education or training may be counted in determining whether the state has met its 50% work participation rate as follows:

**Education and training as Core activities**

- **All hours** spent in **vocational educational training** for up to **12 months**
  - including 2 year degree programs but excluding baccalaureate and advanced degrees
- **All hours** spent by **teen parents** in **secondary education** (high school completion or GED preparation), with **no maximum duration**

**Education and training as Non-core activities** (not counted toward the first 20 hours a week, which must be spent in Core activities)

- **Education directly related to employment** for parents without a GED or high school diploma with **no maximum duration**
  - Includes basic education, GED/ HS completion, English as a Second Language if focused on skills for employment, or combined with job training, or required as a prerequisite to a job or occupation
- **Job skills training** with **no maximum duration**
  - Includes all post-secondary education, basic education, and English as a Second Language if focused on skills for employment or combined with job training, or required as a prerequisite to a job or occupation

**HB 6578 and HB 6587**

Although the intent of these bills appears to be to **expand** education and training opportunities for low income parents receiving FIP, they impose some limits that are not required by federal law and which should be eliminated, such as:

- HB 6578 only allows 20 hours per week of education and training to count during the first 12 months - all hours of postsecondary education or vocational training would be countable during the first 12 months under federal law
- HB 6578 only allows 6 months of education and training to count as fulfilling Work First requirement - all hours of postsecondary education or vocational training would be countable during the first 12 months under federal law
- HB 6578 does not specify that the hours spent in ESL, high school completion, GED preparation, or fast track literacy classes will count toward Work First hourly requirements

- under federal law, such classes may be fully countable for parents under age 20, and countable as non-core activities for other parents

- HB 6587 only allows 30hour-per-week job skills training to count toward meeting work requirements for 180 days, rather than the 12months allowed under federal law
- HB 6587 only allows 10 hours per week of C/ED preparation to count toward work requirements, although federal law would allow all hours to count for parents who are under age 20
- HB 6587 only allows GED preparation classes to count for 180 days, although federal law would not impose a durational limit
- HB6587 would allow postsecondary education to count for the first 12 months only if the parent were also working 20 hours per week, although federal law would allow all hours to count in full for the first 12 months
- HB 6587 would allow postsecondary education to count as a non-core activity (i.e. after 20 hours of work) for a maximum of 24 months, although federal law contains no durational limit and it may take much longer to complete a degree when attending part time or juggling school plus work.

We therefore recommend that the bills be amended to ensure that the education and training permitted under the Social Welfare Act is authorized in addition to - not instead of - the education and training allowed under federal law.